

17 Mercifully, from the early 19th century to the present this peculiar manifestation of cultural schizophrenia among educated African Americans has tended to diminish, for three reasons: the gradual decline in threats of forced expulsion of blacks from the U.S. on the part of whites; successive stages of incorporation of black American popular culture into the "mainstream," so-called, as well as the progressive acculturation of masses of black Americans to the dominant culture, thus rendering the choice between cultural identities progressively less draconian; and the developing sophistication of the African-American intelligentsia in their recognizing that, in order to eliminate categorical difference, it is sometimes necessary to foment a heightened sense of creative difference for the purpose of demonstrating a sense of qualitative sameness.

EXISTENTIAL DYNAMICS OF THEORIZING BLACK INVISIBILITY

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*His shadow, so to speak, has been more real to him
than his personality.*

—Alain Locke

AT LEAST four Africana theorists, W.E.B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, Ralph Ellison, and Frantz Fanon have theorized dimensions of antiblack racism in a way that is so clearly indicative of an existential phenomenological turn that their work bears a great deal of affinity with the work of Jean-Paul Sartre, particularly his discussions of overdetermination and sado-masochism. According to Du Bois, the African American is forced by limited options into a doubled reality—a single body split into two souls with two correlated worlds. The consequence, argues Du Bois, is that problems faced by African Americans sink into the shadows of a skewed conception of African Americans as the problems themselves. Alain Locke takes a similar position in "The New Negro," his famous manifesto for black intellectuals, when he points out that the black intellectual is induced to see himself through "the distorted perspective of a social problem." In *Shadow and Act*, Ralph Ellison refers to this phenomenon as

human evasion ([1972]: 24–44). And Fanon, through the course of four classic volumes, has demonstrated not only the human-evading dimensions of antiblack racism, but also its peculiarly *phobogenic* and *Manichaeic* dimensions, dimensions that enmesh black reality outside of the dimension of the symbolic into the seriousness of the *real* (see esp. Fanon [1952/1967a]).¹ In his philosophical corpus, Jean-Paul Sartre explicates a critical philosophical anthropology that provides a framework for understanding how such evasion is possible. His answer rests in the subject of philosophical anthropology itself and its resistance to the modern conception of the human being as embodying a determined “nature.”

The convergence of Du Bois, Locke, Ellison, Fanon, and Sartre suggests at least a general sense of purpose, although the “situations” of their struggles are markedly different. What these figures have in common are a passion to understand human beings and a passion to articulate a liberation project that does not lead to the estrangement of humanity from itself. They each resist the forces of institutional invisibility and the seduction of constructing theoretical maps that lead nowhere. In what follows, I would like to focus on some dynamics of black invisibility that emerge from the theoretical resources of these five thinkers, with special emphasis on the work of two—Fanon and Sartre.²

I

Any theory that fails to address the existential phenomenological dimension of racism suffers from a failure to address the situational dimension, what Fanon called *l'expérience vécue* (“lived experience”), of race. On the one hand, there are familiar instances of skewed racial visibility:

“Hey, a Negro!”

Or perhaps, as exploited symbols of gastronomic delight in the form of a black face on hot cereal boxes and pancake mixes and all the array of Jungle innuendos, “Sho’ good banana!” (Fanon [1952/1967a]).

Antiblack racism calls for causal explanations and typifications that come to their conclusion, figuratively and literally, in the lynch mob trailing behind bloodhounds in pursuit of a black body. The pursuit is Manichaeic in purpose; it is an effort to weed out the pollution of blackness from the purity of whiteness. It is also, in its essence, theodicean. For in such a world, blackness functions as an aberration that has to be explained without blaming the system in which it emerges. The system of antiblack racism is lived as a self-justified god in its institutions and its inhabitant’s flesh. Emersed in itself, it can only see its faults as “contaminations” of the system. As a consequence, the bloodhound pursuit of a black body takes on a logic premised upon an identity relation between fact and value. The system is fact; it is “what is.” It is absolute. Whatever “is” is what ought to be and hence ought to have been. The inferior Other becomes a fundamental project for the establishment of the Superior Self, whose superiority is a function of what it is.

But consciousness of the inferior Other takes broader significance than visual perception. One can, it is true, see a black before an African American or Afro-Caribbean. Thus the morphological feature of color distortion—transforming brown into black—offers an accessible locus of disdain beyond the various nationalities of blackness that may stand before us. Since blackness transcends Africanness, the aetiological significance of blackness unfolds in the drama of purgation. The morphologically white man standing next to us may be “polluted” by an aetiology of blackness. He may have, for instance, “a drop of black blood” (a dreaded element of an antiblack world). Such “knowledge” has an impact on who or what he is perceived to be in his totality. His flesh becomes “black flesh”; his thoughts, “black thoughts”; his “presence” a form of absence—white absence.

This presence-absence dichotomy is constituted by a particular way of existing. The phenomenological tradition, both existential and transcendental, considers the locus of this dichotomy to be in the unsurpassability of the material standpoint of inquiry itself—the body. In existential phenomenological literature, it has been argued that the body is every possibility from perspective to freedom to meaning. These are not, however, mutually exclusive possibilities. Perspectivity, value, freedom, and meaning can be, as Alain Locke ([1989]: 34–50, 111–126) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962 and 1968) have observed, coextensive features of the lived-experience of embodied consciousness.

The body is our perspective in the world. This perspective has at least three dimensions—the dimension of seeing, the dimension of being seen, and the dimension of being conscious of being seen by others. These three matrices are from Sartre ([1956]: Part III, chaps. 2 and 3). Among their obvious correlates are meaning, meaning-as-seen, and meaning-as-meant; or valuing, value-as-seen, valuing-as-meant. We shall call *sadism* and *masochism* the attempt to deny the coextensivity of these three dimensions. It should be borne in mind that the kind of sadism and masochism to be discussed here are ideal types premised upon what will be regarded as existential *seriousness*—the treatment of our values as material features of the world. This form of sadism and masochism is not the form we find in sexual “play,” where there are sadism and masochism with agreed-upon “rules,” so to speak. The sadism and masochism that will be the focus here are lived by a leit-motif of earnestness, by a hidden flavor of serious “reality.”

Our sadist is a figure with an attitude toward consciousness in the flesh. He wants to believe he is the first dimension without the other two, in the hope of evading the framework of being constituted in the first place. He thus seeks to evade even his own perspectivity. Flesh nauseates him with its propensity to make him aware of his embodiment. He seeks fortification from a world that constitutes who he is. So he retreats into the denial of such a world. He denies the situatedness of existence and opts for the magic of disembodiment. He wipes away the framework from which to be understood as a human being. His path leads to solipsism, the position in which one literally becomes the world, which in principle

cannot raise the question of perspectivity since there are no relations from which to establish being-related in the first place. Free, he thinks, from the judgment of others, judgment that limits the options available to him to believe what he wants to believe, the world becomes the comfort of his ideas. The anguish of ought is believed eradicated, and he is able to saturate himself with sheer seriousness of Will. For our sadist, then, visibility extends out "there," but never "here." He takes advantage of the invisible dimension of himself as seer, speaker, feeler, to deny the fact of his being seen, heard, and felt. He lives himself as though he were disembodied.

Our masochist, on the other hand, denies he can see himself being seen. He throws himself into the sight of others while denying their otherness. He becomes an ossified substance—limp, passive flesh straddled under the look of him who stands as the source of responsibility. No longer regarding himself as responsible for who he is, he constitutes himself as helpless and controlled. His body is not regarded as an active participant in the constitution of a meaningful world that we may call his "life." It is given up. It is on the table. It is a thing. It is corporeal.

We shall regard both sadism and masochism in our sense as forms of misanthropy since both involve forms of evading human being in the flesh. From the standpoint of bad faith, this type of sadist regards himself on the level of "subject" before whom all others are "objects." The masochist regards himself as an object before a subject. Both are, however, objectification of human reality into forms of being-in-itself. For the sadist's effort to make others objects fixes his self-identity into a subject-in-itself, which is not only a form of object, but also tantamount to being a god. Similarly, the masochist's effort to fix the look of the subject-Other calls for the Other as subject-in-itself, which is a form of object, a god. The failure of both sadism and masochism is a function of their being rooted in the evasion of human beings qua consciousness in the flesh.

No human being is a subject alone, nor an object alone. It is even incorrect to say that a human being is "both." A human being is neither a subject nor an object but instead, in the language of Simone de Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty, "ambiguous." This ambiguity is an expression of the human being as a meaningful, multifaceted way of being that may involve contradictory interpretations, or at least equivocal ones. Such ambiguity stands not as a dilemma to be resolved, as in the case of an equivocal sentence, but as a way of living to be described. The phenomenological task at hand is thus to draw out a hermeneutic of this ambiguity.

In the Africana experience this calls for description of the ways in which human ambiguity is manifested or evaded. As is well known, the procedure usually taken when it comes to studying blacks is that of evasion.³

II

A stark evasion manifests itself in the face of the black body. The black body lives in an antiblack world as a form of absence of human presence. Sartre and Frantz

Fanon have identified this phenomenon as "overdetermination." In *Black Skin*, Fanon declares,

I am overdetermined from outside. I am not the slave of the "idea" that others have of me but of my appearance. I move slowly in the world, accustomed to aspiring no longer to appear. I proceed by crawling. Already the white looks, the only true looks [*les seuls vrais*], are dissecting me. I am *fixed*. Having prepared their microtome, they slice away objectively pieces of my reality. I am disclosed. I feel, I see in those white looks that it is not a new man who enters, but a new type of man, a new genus. Why, a Negro! (Fanon [1952]: 93/[1967a]: 116)

Overdetermination transforms consciousness in the flesh into a thing, a form of being-in-itself. An ossified reality emerges. But this ossified reality is not on the level of ordinary sadism, where one's own invisibility is the project through an Other's visibility. To take such a route would entail a failure to appreciate the existential dimension of the black perspective on this phenomenon. In order to see the black as a thing requires the invisibility of a black's perspective. The situation is familiar, as we can see in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*:

I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasm. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me.... That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their inner eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality...(3)

The black body is confronted by the situation of its absence. A binary world is imposed upon it which functions as a constant source of evasion. Like Dostoyevsky's *Underground Man*, who exists in spite of logic, the black body finds itself existing in spite of Reason. "As the other said it, when I was there, it [Reason] was not; when it was there, I was no longer" (Fanon [1952]: 96/[1967a]: 119–120). That black presence is absence and white presence is presence leads to a skewed logic. Rules that apply to white bodies, by virtue of a bad faith, substantiated identity of being-what-it-is, change when applied to black bodies in an antiblack world. Observe:

An unusual clumsiness came upon me. The real world contested my place. In the white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the assimilation of his bodily schema. Consciousness of the body is a uniquely negating activity.

It is a third-person consciousness...Then the bodily schema, attacked from several points, collapses and gives way to a racial epidermal schema. In the train, it is no longer a matter of knowledge of my body in the third person, but in a triple person. In the train, instead of one, I am left with two, three places...(Fanon [1952]:89-90/[1967a]: 110-112).

The black body in situation faces more than DuBois' observation of a double soul. Fanon identifies three. And in *Women, Race, and Class*, Angela Y. Davis has identified at least four. The black body stands humanoid, colored, engendered, institutionalized. Deleuze and Guattari's body without organs is the black's nightmare of sealed exteriority epidermalized; there is *only* an outside. The fallacy is set in motion.

"How does it feel to be a problem?"

Whereas the white body lives a slippery spirit, by virtue of its institutional posture of sadism, the black body is sticky and easily caught. Antiblack racism problematizes blackness so as to evade black problems. For black problems are difficult problems for everybody. Four hundred-plus years of super exploitation are difficult to erase over night. So denial emerges on levels that are almost magical. *Presto!* Blacks disappear and so does responsibility for blackness. Consider Ralph Ellison's observation from *Shadow and Act* that

Color prejudice springs not...from misinformation alone, but from an inner need to believe...Hence whatever else the Negro stereotype might be as a social instrumentality, it is also a key figure in a magic rite by which the white American seeks to resolve the dilemma arising between his democratic beliefs and certain antidemocratic practices, between his acceptance of the sacred democratic belief that all men are created equal and his treatment of every tenth man as though he were not. (28)

Let us consider two additional forms of invisibility that emerge from such inner need to believe. Black bodies take on peculiar forms of anonymity. Alfred Schutz speaks of anonymity as the mundane ability to stand for another in the realm of understanding.⁴ Anonymity both wipes away and preserves the very notion of a private language and epistemological privilege. In this regard, anonymity is restricted to a form of universality of human presence, where the rules *qua* rules are expected to apply to all human beings. Implicit in anonymity, then, is its own limitation. There is a dialectic of a private life in virtue of a public life that is so mundane that it ceases to function as a general concern of any one else. When concern emerges, it is in terms of recognizing an individual's uniqueness, that although one can stand in another's place as a human being, one cannot stand in the place of another's life.

The logic of anonymity is, however, perverted in an antiblack world. If a black is overdetermined, then to see that black is to see every black. The black's individual life ceases to function as an object of epistemological, aesthetic, or moral concern. For although an empathetic dimension of anonymity disappears, a racially relative form of anonymity emerges. The black becomes an opportune, economic entity. One is led to believe, for instance, that one can "have blacks" by virtue of having that black, that anonymous black. The black representative emerges. One seeks out black leaders. Black novelists emerge as more than symbols of blackness; they become blackness on our shelves, our curricula, our mythology. We can stand as a society without responsibility for the blackness we exclude by way of the blackness we include, which we identify as blackness *in toto*. This is because a little bit of blackness is always too much blackness from the disease of overdetermination. Blackness in an antiblack world is always superfluous.

In addition to overdetermination, Fanon has described this superfluous dimension of antiblack "perception" of blackness as *phobogenic*. What this means is that the black body does not live on the symbolic level in an antiblack world. It is locked in the serious, material values of the real. Thus, whereas the white body can live a symbolic alienation rich with neurotic content and thereby serving as a foundation for psychoanalysis, the black body, whether in dream content or awake intentions, always stands for "what it is"—*the black*. The black therefore does not symbolize crime and licentious sexuality in an antiblack world. The black *is* crime and licentious sexuality, bestiality, in an antiblack world. That is why "Africa" means jungle and wild animals, in spite of rain forests and animal preserves comprising only a small portion of its ecology, and why Egypt and other supposedly "civilized" regions were severed from their African links.⁵

What psychoanalysis could not achieve, then, was an explanation of blacks in the world of dreams and even Jungian archetypical fantasy, for everywhere in the case of the former, the black has been structured as the material manifestation of evil, and everywhere in the case of the latter, the black has been negatively impacted by the growth of Europe. Psychoanalysis cannot therefore understand the black woman and the black man because both stand below the symbolic in the racist context of perverse anonymity: their alienation is not neurotic. It is the historical reality of a phobogenic complex. For psychoanalysis to be able to understand the black woman and the black man, the rapists in her dreams and the object of desire in his dreams must be psychosexual displacements of historical reality with an ultimate reference in family life—their father and mother. But racism and colonialism have left the matrices locked on a near historical-ontological schema. The black and the white in such a world are "real," and no amount of neurotic catharsis will in itself change the historical reality of their "place." The black woman and black man are therefore invisible beyond perverse anonymous subjects, Fanon argues, in psychoanalysis, whether Freudian, Jungian, Lacanian, and we may add today—Irigaray.⁶

The second form of invisibility turns inward and can be regarded as what we may call "a black *thang*." We return to Fanon for our example. He declares, "We knew [a] black girl who had a list of Parisian dance-halls 'where-there-is-no-risk-of-encountering-niggers'" (Fanon [1952]: 40/[1967a]: 50). Among blacks the phenomenon is familiar. Imagine this black woman going to a cocktail party in which she is the only black person. She looks around and is comforted by the sight of whiteness. Let us say that these white people continue to behave in a seemingly mundane manner. The situation is seductive. Seduction is an effort to get what we want by permitting another to be responsible for it. The seducer assures us of the world we claim to want while giving us the world we desire. This assurance is a mirrored unreality. Jean Baudrillard agrees when he writes that

"I'll be your mirror" does not signify "I'll be your reflection" but "I'll be your deception."... *To seduce is to die as reality and reconstitute oneself as illusion...* Narcissus too loses himself in his own illusory image; that is why he turns from his truth, and by his example turns others from their truth... (Baudrillard: 69).

We return to the cocktail party. What truth is this black turned from when she looks around her? In Schutzian language, let us synchronize ourselves with this meaning-context.

The whites: "There is nothing abnormal here. This is how we behave when there are only whites at a party."

The black: "Gee, they are acting as though there is nothing abnormal about my being here. They don't notice me. They must be behaving the way they do when there are only whites in the room. They are not rejecting me as one of them. I must be one of them. I am white."

Liberated, she thinks, from the burden of blackness, our black lives her (false) whiteness. She tells jokes, she speaks of other white friends, there is laughter, the white masks encircle her, and in their face she sees her own white skin; the pink flesh clasps glasses, tugs at the shoulder to meet other guests, the others become symmetrical, in an intoxicating dance of I-thou—until the door opens and a black stranger looks around for a moment and *locates* our black. The black stranger smiles, waves, or takes that black look of *acknowledgment*.

Translation?

The whites (to our black): "We'll be your mirror."

The other black (to our black): "I am your mirror."

On two levels, then, the dialectic is set in motion against the black body. Problematized, it faces what Fanon calls de-negrification. Its task is to disappear. It is difficult to maintain the illusion of seeing-without-seeing. No greater evasion of the flesh promises more certainty than its extermination. But in the meantime, this extermination is role-played, and it is psychically and socio-politically structured with oblique sight. Born of evasion, it evades every effort at identification.

We have learned many ways of evading race. For instance, Cornel West says that race matters in the midst of his discussion of contemporary race matters. The contemporary antiblack racist self-righteously responds,

"Is it more so than gender? Isn't class division the real problem?"

Blacks are oppressed by the weight of overdetermination.

"But I didn't personally victimize any black people."

Blacks are racially discriminated against in the work force.

"But unqualified people shouldn't be hired over qualified ones."

Blacks with excellent credentials are passed over in the work force.

"But whites with excellent credentials are passed over too in favor of blacks."

There is hostility to black presence in the United States and the United Kingdom.

"But there are blacks who don't like white people, as well as other colored people. Look at that black racist who injured and killed all those people on the Long Island Railroad."

Blacks are marked by inferiority everywhere.

"Now, now, that is generalizing a U.S. disease. We treat our blacks very differently. In fact, we downright valorize them. That's why U.S. blacks are usually happier here—in Europe—or here, in Latin America."

Fanon is nauseated. "From all sides tens and hundreds of pages assail me and impose themselves on me," he writes. "Still," he continues, "a single line would be enough. Supply a single answer and the black problem will lose its seriousness. What do human beings want? What do blacks want?"⁷

Fanon's initial response was to dream of walking into a sea of mundanity, anonymously situated as whites are among whites, but the existential dimension of his response, the formulation of humanity in terms of desire, suggests another possibility. To want at all, to desire at all, is to be a human being. To desire in bad faith is to want to be a free substance—God—which in an antiblack world amounts to being white.

But to desire in critical good faith is to reach out to humanity, to resist closure, to fight against sado-masochistic substantiation. But the query of desire is a trap, is it not? For who is ever really satisfied with getting what she or he wants?

Does the antiblack racist really want to know what blacks want?

"What do blacks want?"

Decoded, it is a variation of,

"What can I do to make them shut up?"

What does the black want?

Ask a black woman.

Ask a black man.

Ask a black child.

Ask a thousand, a million, a billion blacks, and perhaps at some point along the way the error will be realized.

III

There is a great deal of work to be done on the problem of understanding race and racism.⁸ In the black context, which is in fact many cultural contexts, it should be clear that there is no chance of coming to any level of understanding without realizing the factors at work in their invisibility as subjects of human study. It is political reality that black people are not the primary players in their ossification as objects of a sadistic political gaze, so it would be problematic to construct them as masochistic, even though there certainly are masochistic antiblack situations in which masochism emerges, as we have seen in our cocktail party example. The question that remains is the degree to which those of us who seek to understand black people also bear in mind that black people are human beings. This was certainly W.E.B. Du Bois' realization while conducting his *Philadelphia Negro* and his criterion of studying the problems faced by people of African descent instead of studying them as the problems themselves. But for a hermeneutic of Africana reality, as well as the more broad *black* reality, the problem as problematization needs interpretation. In this regard, the existential phenomenological rejection of a nature and insistence on human reality's ability to live on the level of a false, binary reality of sadistic subject and masochistic object are helpful. Their implications are only hinted at here. But it should be clear that their development warrants further study.

NOTES

- 1 All of the translations of Fanon's work are mine. Citations refer to page numbers in the French and English editions, separated by a slash.
- 2 The focus on Fanon and Sartre is primarily due to my having written full-length treatments of their work. See Gordon (1995a) and (1995b). A list that emphasizes the existential more than the phenomenological dimensions can, however, be broadened to include obvious figures like Richard Wright and, in the 19th century, Anna Julia Cooper, as I have demonstrated in the introduction to this anthology.
- 3 Today this evasion is particularly acute in the desire to "decenter" blacks in race discourse; see Omi and Winant and my criticism of the "racial formation" turn (Gordon [1995e]), where I argue that Omi and Winant confuse social constructivity (which is an ontological claim about reference) with racial meaning (which pertains to the concept of race and a claim about sense).
- 4 See all of the Schutz references in the bibliography and Natanson (1986) and Gordon (1995b): chap. 3.
- 5 For a full-scale discussion of the African question, see Shaw, et al, and for the "Western Civilization" question, see the controversial Bernal. A great deal of the controversy over the latter stemmed from obvious phobogenic dimensions of Classical Scholarship. Bernal was demonstrating, as Fanon would say, something like Rodin's *The Thinker*—with an erection.
- 6 For discussion of Luce Irigaray and race, see Patricia Huntington (this volume, below).

- 7 I have translated this passage from Fanon's Introduction to *Black Skin* in the plural because of the generality of the definite article in the French and the problem of its specificity in English. Here is the original French:

Que veut l'homme?

Que veut l'homme noir?

The last two questions can also be translated, "What does man want? What does black man want?" Fanon is clearly here speaking of the Manichaeanism of separating human kind into separate *species* of a new genus—"Man."

- 8 For those who are in doubt, see Rose and Ross: 1-52.